DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 580 RC 018 423

AUTHOR Agnello-Linden, Mary Frances
TITLE Alcohol Use and Abuse in a Rural School.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Rural Education Association (Jackson, MS, October 10-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alcohol Abuse; Community Influence; Drinking; High Schools; *Parent Attitudes; Peer Influence; *Rural Schools; Social Influences; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Texas

ABSTRACT

Student responses were elicited in classroom discussions about alcohol use in their own rural community. Teachers and parents responded to questionnaires and interviews concerning various aspects of alcohol consumption as part of the local lifestyle. Students gave reasons for drinking such as ethnic and religious acceptance in the local community, parental permissiveness, and lack of parental supervision. Many students focused on the idea of social drinking as opposed to addictive drinking. They reported a general lack of police enforcement of underage drinking laws. Some students knew serious drinkers and described a family tendency toward alcoholism. Students usually obtained alcohol by asking people to buy it for them or by using fake identification. The 10 teachers interviewed agreed that students began drinking at early ages largely due to peer pressure. Alcohol was seen as readily accessible to teens who had too much idle time. Teachers expressed belief that alcohol affects student performance in school, self-concept, and discipline both at home and in school. There was general consensus that alcohol has profound effects on families, ranging from divorce, uncomfortable home environment, and alienation, to economic instability. Contrary to student and teacher reports, parents reported that they and their children did not drink at home or away from home. Most parents felt that the use of alcohol by youth did affect the family and community, and that the family affected an individual's decision to drink more than other circumstances did. The findings in this study correspond closely with the findings of a state survey of alcohol and drug use in Texas. (KS)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

# ALCOHOL USE AND ABUSE IN A RURAL SCHOOL

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mary Frances Agnello-Linden
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by

Mary Frances Agnello-Linden

Texas A & M University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 339580

Living in the Texas countryside for nine years and getting back to school in a full-time teaching capacity for four of those years put me in touch with local youth, their maturation process, and their experimentation. Using alcohol as the primary pastime, especially on weekends, was the thing to do when I was an adolescent as it is now for my students. While alcohol and drug abuse is largely thought of as an urban problem, it is also a rural one. Statistics from a local Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council were revealing about students' involvement with alcohol, but not as telling as firsthand accounts from the students.

Having become more cognizant of the use and abuse of substances while teaching in an urban school district, I found students and their encounters with illegal and legal drugs a topic that merited attention. Yet I scarcely expected rural students to display the same characteristics.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE STUDY

We can be assured that the use of alcohol is not confined to urban areas, to one side of small towns or another, or to one kind of rural student or another. Many students use alcohol in our communities, just as many of their parents do. The reality of my students' alcohol consumption

RC 018423



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

confronts me frequently as I listen to them discussing last week's drinking adventure or planning next weekend's party, where the standard refreshment is a sixteen-gallon keg of beer. Perhaps it really startled me when this conversation came into the classroom--leaving the informality of the halls at school and becoming as much or more a focus than the lessons or themes covered in lecture and discussion. And it really hit home when my theater arts class was asked to perform a skit during a week's activities centered around alcohol and drug abuse prevention.

I thought the skit was a great idea for a purposeful drama activity, and the counselor gave us a book of various plots to choose from. It was her desire that we actually work on personifying and dramatizing what happens to the teens who abuse substances. Her particular interest was to make the elementary students aware of the effects of alchol and drug abuse which occur frequently in this small rural community and in many others in our area as well. Although the drama students were receptive to the skit which portrayed the evils of drug abuse, they were adamant about the need to omit the mention of alcohol from the dialogue, because it is a legal drug.

Their rationale was that because adults can drink legally at age twenty-one, it follows that adolescents, even though they are minors under the law, should be allowed to as well. "Wouldn't you rather your children drink alcohol than do illegal drugs?" they asked as I tried to reason with them. My reply was a vague, "Yes, but...." They were not open to the idea that improperly used, all drugs are dangerous. It was clear that many of them felt justified in their thinking that because alcohol was "legal" for adults, it was okay to consume it rather than other drugs.

A week passed and an unforeseen occurrence made me realize just how correct Shakespeare was when he said, "The play's the thing." One of my drama students was caught skipping school; he was found drinking with some of his friends. They were all brought back to school in various states of inebriation. This particular student played the part of a youth who had gotten into trouble for using alcohol excessively and indiscreetly in our play. If only I had known at the time how severe his own drinking problem was, I would not have waited to talk to the counselor and his parents. The young man and others who collaborated with him on their day of indulgent truancy received two days of in-school suspension and several warnings from their parents and school officials. This activity was not re-enacted during school hours until the day before the Christmas holidays. And in spite of the punishment received by the student and his peers, there were no attempts by the participants or others to conceal drinking activities after school hours or the discussions about them. An insight into the severity of this students' drinking problem is illustrated vividly in a composition he wrote for me. He says:

> It all started when I was nine. My parents always let me drink whatever I wanted as long as I was at the house. That was my downfall because I started to drink more and more till I started to drink to get drunk. I didn't start very heavily--just beer; then it got to be mixed drinks and then straight liquor. My mother finally caught me one night when I came home blitzed out of my mind and tried to talk to her. I got caught other times after that, but this was the worst of punishment I ever got--grounded for two weeks. The next weekend I got just as drunk but not caught. It got even worse when I got into high school because I started to know guys that I never met before,

> and a lot of them were over the age of 21. A lot of my friends have had trouble with the cops--they either got an M.I.P., D.W.I., or time in jail. People say that my friends and I are alcoholics. How much is considered a problem? I have never had a run-in with the police, but I consider myself lucky, and that is all. I have been to jail for speeding though; I was doing 110 in a 40 M.P.H. zone, but that was just a night in jail. My friend, on the other hand, had a wreck when he was under the influence and killed a guy so he is now serving time.

## THE STUDY

This young man's case was more serious than most of the student assessments regarding their own drinking habits and practices. Prompted by his problem as well as the apparent student indulgence in alcohol, I decided to delve into this topic. The following comments by rural students, teachers, and parents illuminate the perspectives they bring to the issue of alcohol use and abuse in this community. The statements were made in response to questionnaires and interviews eliciting information about the community's opinions concerning various aspects of alcohol consumption as part of the local lifestyle.

The following discussion is a reflection of what I found to be the most salient comments by three of five classes in my rural school. Rather than interview students individually, I conducted and taped discussions during the planned "Alcohol Awareness Week." I also sought teacher responses to eight questions directed at their feelings about the effects of alcohol on students, families, school, community, etc. The parent survey questionnaire was similar to the teacher's but included 11

questions. In compliance with school administrative requests and ethical concerns, pseudonyms have been used throughout this study.

In general, students look upon their drinking as social, tension-reductive, and reflective of the behavior patterns of their parents, extended families, as well as peers. In some cases, it is a defiance of authority. They also explained a "perceived" exaggeration of drinking among the youth by them and their elders which becomes exacerbated as small town gossips pass the "news" on to their friends who augment the details as the stories are shared and expanded.

## THE STUDENT WORD ON ALCOHOL

Several students summarized this rural school's relationship to alcohol as comparable to what exists in urban school settings. "We drink and everyone in the city does the same thing--cruise around and drink beer." Although a few students said that they did not drink and that their parents did not drink because of religious reasons or lack of interest, a majority of them indicated that they drink, that their parents drank when they were their age, and that their parents know their children are drinking. They felt justified to cite their county as the one with the highest per capita alcohol consumption in the state, but implicated the next town's ability to surpass the local one: "You should see the people in the next town. They have wilder keg parties than we do and they really get drunk." On the other hand, another student contradicted this idea with,

"It's worse in this town. I've lived in other places, and I've never seen it as bad as it is here."

Ethnicity was blamed for the pervasiveness of drinking in the community. An alternate explanation was, "Our religion allows us to drink." Some cited parental permissiveness and lack of parental supervision as other reasons. Many students focused on the idea of social drinking as opposed to addictive drinking:

> I think it's social drinking (that most of us do). It's fun when you're with your friends at a pasture party and get around the fire and have a few beers, and everybody gets real bubbly to where you really talk...And the guys who don't talk normally start talking. They're relaxed. You dance better, everything.

Most students agreed that they drank for fun, and that drinking "at home takes the fun out of it."

Negative familial experiences with alcoholics gave two students insight into the seriousness of those with uncontrollable drinking problems. One said:

> Nobody says 'I'm going to be an alcoholic.' ...People don't realize that it doesn't start out so bad. People start out going to parties and drinking a few drinks....My dad will not to this day tell you that he was drinking two fifths of whiskey a day.

The other student whose grandmother was an alcohic shared her story:

> My grandmother used to get her friends to buy alcohol for her. She would hide it on the side of the road and in

police threaten to come to the pasture parties, but we have them on private property," John said.

Andrew illustrated typical police intervention in their drinking affairs with the following:

> I'll tell you how little the cops care. Right before school started, there were some of my friends who were minors visibly drinking. They had a keg in the back of their truck which was parked at the local supermarket (where they drank all night ).

Mona added, "The TABC (Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission) drops in sometimes. They've busted a couple of people recently. They were driving around, but everyone spread the word. Everyone went home and went to bed. The town was dead at 8:00."

Criteria that indicated serious inability to handle alcohol included the "inability to make it home after a dance on Saturday night" or "to make it to church on Sunday morning after a dance on Saturday night." Some students, however, indicated that serious drinkers do exist in the community. According to

Ron's account:

> We know people have drinking problems when you meet someone at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, and they've got two cases of beer iced down in the truck. Naw, they're not alcoholics; they only drank a case of beer, and they've got two more.

Jane continued the thought:

> And what are they going to amount to? They're going to live in this town for the rest of their lives, have their little job where they get paid minimum wage.

Bill concluded:

> ditches. She got really hateful because in the end no one would buy her alcohol.

Several comments about the family tendency to alcoholism were, "It depends on who you are," "It's in peoples' genes and has to do with personality," and "Most of the kids who are alcoholic have parents who are like that."

Mary's statements assumed the stance of the American feeling of "self-control" with alcohol. (Denzin, 1986)

> You know what the main thing is--you have to know your limit. You have to know how many you can drink to where you feel good and bubbly and have a buzz, rather than puking your guts out and you know what? A lot of times you have to learn from experience.

Some students felt that being underage makes alcohol appealing. Ineffectual legislation mandating drinking laws was no deterrent to the students. Mary says:

> We've been told that legislators won't change the law back to 18-year-olds being able to buy liquor because the 18-year-olds will buy the 15, 16, and 17-year-olds beer, but what's the difference? The 21-year-olds buy their friends beer. Thirty-year-olds buy it for their friends.

The ease with which students can get alcohol was discussed at length. The ploys ranged from approaching people in convenience store parking lots and asking them to buy it for them, to using "fake i.d.'s," to their parents buying it for them. Community law enforcement was described as very lax allowing the students to have weekend beer bashes (referred to as pasture parties, campouts, or keg parties) regularly. "The

> They'll be making enough money to buy that beer and get drunk on the weekend.

## THE TEACHER WORD ON ALCOHOL

The ten teacher interviews concerning alcohol use by the students disclosed agreement about the student population beginning to drink at early ages. Their opinions ranged from "...as early as fifth grade and steadily in seventh grade," to ...age 12 to 13..., to "...by freshman year they're drinking at least a fair amount." Reasons for drinking included, "They drink to be part of 'the group'" and because of "peer pressure." An understanding of community social norms was expressed in the following comment, "Drink is largely customary in the community, and parents don't seem to have any particular controls over the young doing as they do."

A hometown perspective of one teacher who grew up in this community and who recently came back to teach extrapolates about revolutionary social and economic changes in rural life and relates them to the present existing situation of students and how they spend their time, money, and energy:

> I don't think they drink for the buzz of the alcohol or just to get drunk. I think they drink because of the pressure of their friends. I'd say that when I was growing up here that we didn't have convenience stores that were open till 10:00 p.m. Everything closes at 5:30 in the evenings and everybody went home and went to bed. Most of the time in those days (16-20 years ago), you worked extra jobs like shining shoes at the barber shop or pumping gas and fixing flats at the station, or at the feed store, or hauling hay; nowadays there are round bales and

> everything that used to be hard labor is automated. You were too busy to drink or your parents didn't let you. Nowadays you've got the local store that's open till 10:00 p.m. The parking lot there is more or less a beer joint, and you have your older friends who graduated the year before you trying to make you grow up quick. I think most kids today don't work extra jobs if they work at all. They have too much idle time, spend more time riding around in new cars, whereas in my time we didn't have cars till we got out of high school and bought our own.

Ready accessibility to alcohol was noted as a significant catalyst to student drinking. "They drink at dances, weddings, and parties where there are kegs." "They get alcohol at home. Mom or Dad buys it for them, or their older friends." Two hometown teachers both said they grew up with alcohol in their homes; they didn't drink it, however, because of the discipline in the home.

Another teacher's perception reflects the law's inability to stop teens from drinking because of town politics:

> The police are afraid to do anything about the youth drinking because the parents jump on them so hard. I think it's a classic case of everyone being afraid to do something about it. I don't think the lawmen are afraid of the students; they're afraid of the parents. The parents are afraid of embarrassment, so they act like, 'Don't mess with me or I'll make you look bad.'

The effects of alcohol were profound and negative in the teachers' opinions, affecting the students' discipline, performance in school, self-concept, and discipline both at home and in school. One teacher said that

alcohol "...makes them feel like grown-ups because they can drink and they don't have to act like students in the classroom."

There was general consensus that alcohol has profound effects on families ranging from divorce, uncomfortable home environment, and alienation, to economic instability. The drinking parent, as described by one teacher, can produce one of two opposite reactions in children. One is that parental modeling leads them to think that it is all right to drink, and the other is that alcoholic parents may cause embarrassment in the children leading them to stay away from home. An almost sacred tradition of alcohol use in the community is described by Teacher #3, who said, "A theologian once defined religion as anything one is ultimately concerned with. Alcohol is literally a religion to some people in this community."

Teachers believe that this school is seriously affected by alcohol usage. "On Monday morning a lot of our kids are absent or hung over because they're not feeling well as a result of having had such a big drinking weekend. "Other insights indicate alcohol is commonplace in their lives. "Since everyone drinks as much as they do, they start to accept it as a way of life...When something bad happens, all of a sudden everyone is concerned. But unless a tragedy happens, it's just every day." "Because the kids think they can get away with anything in the community, it's the same at school."

A fourth teacher interviewee cited community effects of alcohol consumption and looked to the bigger picture of society in general:

> I think we need to look at it as a societal problem--an American societal problem--a nationwide problem. Look at some of the prominent citizens in the U.S. who are alcoholics. Also, compare the present to the past

> when you were growing up. It was probably worse in my school district (in the city). We had an open campus. What did people do during lunch? Every day they got into their pickups and went to the store to get beer. It's not any worse here or nowadays than it was in the past.

## THE PARENT WORD ON ALCOHOL

The parents' responses to their own use and their children's use of alcohol reflected an interesting twist to the study. Most of them reported that they and their children do not drink at home or away from home, nor do their children drive under the influence of alcohol. However, they indicated that they would worry about them if they did and that they worry about peer influence leading them to drink. Most of the parents interviewed felt that the use of alcohol by youth does affect the family, "breaking down typical roles" or "destroying the family structure and unit," and causing stress, anxiety, and fear." There was also the feeling that family affects an individual's decision to drink more than other circumstances.

Similarly, they indicated that the youth's use of alcohol affects the community by "endangering the health and welfare of all residents. "One emphatic parent expressed that while her child was a good student, drinking by the young caused others to have "a frivolous approach to life, thinking of it only as a blast, with little regard and commitment to values, ultimately leading to their not taking school seriously." One parent responded that many children drink due to boredom or emotional problems and said that "anyone who drinks is affected emotionally and in their

performance in their daily lives with respect to relationships with people, as well as their health."

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

The coordinator at the local Council for Alcohol and Drug Abuse presents another side of the issue with cogency:

> The fact that penalties for minors in possession of alcohol are weak, coupled with the double standard exhibited by parents in their use of alcohol, as well as the augmenting stresses and pressures of everyday life, make kids turn to alcohol and drugs more and more....Those who realize they have alcohol problems and seek treatment get mixed messages when they go home and see their parents drinking. In AA, there are few young people and therefore peer support is unusual. It's especially difficult and therefore peer support is unusual. It's especially difficult when young people leave school without skills or forethought about how to support themselves...All we do is undone at home if parents and families continue using substances from which the kids are trying to divorce themselves.... Legal consequences of M.I.P. should be as serious for parents as for the kids, and they should have to endure the penalties together.

**CONCLUSION**

Accumulated data in my study corresponded closely with the findings of the Texas School Survey of Alcohol and Drug Abuse done by the

Public Policy Resources Laboratory at Texas A&M University in College Station. The survey questioned the students about three aspects of drug use: 1) general use patterns, 2) specific use of substances, and 3) recent and past use of substances. While the use of many drugs by our secondary student poplulation ranged from 1.7-14 percent and is fairly parallel to statewide use, the use of alcohol among the same population was at 85 percent, well above the comparable statewide use at 77 percent. Fifty-two percent of secondary students reported using alcohol in the last thirty days, 12 percent above the state's average of 40 percent. Nineteen percent of our 9-12 graders admitted they attended school while intoxicated as compared to the state average of 10.4 percent. Perhaps, the most frightening statistic of all is the fact that 55 percent of our elementary school students use alcohol, 15 percent above the state average.

Excessive alcohol consumption by the community's youth has definite negative effects in the opinion of teachers and parents, although students feel it is quite normal. My students are planning a weekend pasture party as I conclude this study. General discontent with the school environment is prevalent in the student body. In a place isolated from many cultural and entertainment opportunities, students seek pleasure in alcohol-centered activities. They follow in the tradition of their families and peers. An automated economy precludes many part time jobs which youngsters held in days past. They have high expectations for material wealth and regard most things that take time, like reading and writing, as too much trouble and work. Perhaps the glamor of television and slick movies causes them to expect far too much than is realistically possible. Alcohol, which is so accessible, becomes their ticket to freedom, fun, and

sometimes failure, as they "exclude other possibilities of self-development" and fulfillment in favor of the immediate satisfaction of inebriation.

**References**

Denzin, Norman K. *The Alcoholic Self*, Sage Publications, 1987.

Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms,* Cambridge University Press, New York, 1983.

Killen, Mrs. James C., Ed. *History of Lee County*, Nortex Press, Quanah, Texas, 1974.

Lincoln, Yvonne S. and Guba, Egon G. *Naturalistic Inquiry,* Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, 1985.

*Texas School Survey of Drug and Alcohol Use*, Public Policy Resources Laboratory, Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas, 1990.